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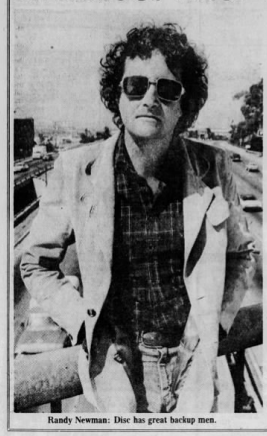
SEASON'S WISHES: ROCK ALBUMS AND FILM FARE

Greatest hits: Class is Paul Simon's mark



Randy Newman: Disc has great backup men.

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

Throughout this autumn and early winter buying season, most of the superstar attractions of rock and pop have made sure they have new records out. Supposedly 'important' acts have come up with their seasonal gifts, which they hope will make the cash registers ring.

Those who don't have new records have been repackaged in 'Greatest Hits' discs, a formula that's proven tremendously successful in recent years.

Not only do these albums appeal to listeners who don't own the entire repertoire of a particular act, but also to those who do and want their listening confined to their absolute favorite numbers. Thus, greatest hits have double-clout and this season there are some knockout packages available: Paul Simon, Neil Young, and Joe Cocker in particular.

Class, craft and intelligence are trademarks of **Paul Simon's** music and his 'Greatest Hits' (Columbia) chronicles a dozen of his finest efforts since his split with Garfunkel. Simon is a songwriter of sparcity and sensitivity, and this album is a glowing testament to his remarkable gifts. He may be too rarefied for some, but the cure he puts into his work gives them an accessibility to all that is rare in today's songwriters.

Neil Young has had a rocky career but his has been one of the important rock careers of the past ten years. A superb retrospective is the three-disc set, 'Decade' (Reprise), which chronicles his life and times from the Buffalo Springfield through to his latest solo efforts. 'Decade' makes plain the constancy of temperament throughout his career, and the set makes his moody quest much more bearable to listen to than rifling through his entire catalogue in search of his nuggets of bon mots.

'Joe Cocker's Greatest Hits' (A&M) is probably the best value of any hits package, because after his first two albums, Cocker has done precious little. This album includes such classics as 'Little Help From my Friends' and 'Delta Lady' from those early years as well as 'You Are So Beautiful' and other recent songs that've been buried in Cocker's drunken attempts at 'supporting' his recording career with tours. This may well be the last Cocker album, but it is invaluable as a record of what once was one of the most urgently emotional voices in rock.

What would Christmas be like without another **Beatles** package — this time it's 'The Beatles Love Songs', a double-disc set that comes complete with Avedon photography and a lyric book of fake-parchment stock. A neat marketing idea: the Beatles had a joyous sense of romance and it's all ladled out effectively in this album. As far as this being their 'greatest', the album is of the hit-or-miss variety.

An excellent gift idea for those whose rock 'n' rolling days go back to the late fifties and early sixties is **'Phil Spector's Greatest Hits,'** a monumental, and fun, collection of pop's great producer. The 'wall-of-sound' supporting the Ronettes, Crystals, Righteous Bros., et al, remain indelibly atmospheric: there's still nothing comparable to it today.

* * *

As for today, there's a host of artistes waiting in the wings for immortality, the kind that's wrapped in greenbacks. The following is a sample survey:

Crosby&Nash, Live (ABC): Still alive after all these years, the old Woodstock free-spirit remains preserved in jellied nostalgia in the performances of its original practitioners, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, all of whom are part of several successful chart bestsellers. David Crosby and Graham Nash, though ravaged by time, have been making the most hay, due to their duet career. Crosby and Nash also know how to package their talents, including CSNY classics to this live set of recent material. They sound virtually the same as they did then — they grind their harmonies and love messages like an axe.

Randy Newman, Little Criminals (Warner Bros.): Perhaps America's most pampered minor artiste has finally arrived with an album that can elicit wider appeal. Newman is the quirkiest songwriter in pop and rock, and he's a pretty idiosyncratic singer, too. He doesn't give up either quality here, but he is backed up lavishly by some of the whiz sessionmen of Los Angeles (including Glen Grey of the Eagles). His view of human nature is by turns mean and empathetic, and 'Little Criminals' is his slickest and most enigmatic disc yet.

Rod Stewart, Foot Loose and Fancy Free (Warner Bros.): Rock's raunchiest voice is back in high gear, although this album is not quite as moving as 'A Night on the Town.' Featuring his new band that is blasting its way through arenas across America (including the Forum, last Oct.), Stewart launches into a dense heavy-rock backing. The nuance is in the loudness instead of in the tear-jerky touches he added to previous solo records. While Stewart struts and screeches in the husky whisky voice of his, the heavy drum pounding of Carmine Appice (formerly of Vanilla Fudge) dominates the soundtrack. 'Hot Legs' is Stewart's current show of force, and the imitation of the Fudge hit, 'You Keep Me Hangin' On,' is effective.

Levon Helm & the RCO All-Stars (ABC): Possibly the warmest album of the year. Band drummer Levon Helm (the voice of 'The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down') and pals have come up with a glowing nugget here.

His protagonists are all tasty musicians who go back in years and thus know plenty about rhythm and blues, the element that makes this album tick. Booker T. Jones and his two MGs (guitarist Steve Cropper and bassist 'Duck' Dunn) are in fine form — the most exquisite rhythm section of all R&B — complemented by Paul Butterfield's harmonica (perhaps the most dramatic solos he's ever recorded)and Mac 'Dr. John' Rebbenack's handywork.

The flavour in this cooking soul gumbo is irresistable. The musicians have come up with extraordinarily witty, sublime performances, the kind that's all too rare these days.

Merle Haggard, My Farewell to Elvis (MCA): One of country music's most rugged singers delivers the classiest tribute to the late King of rock 'n' roll. With the exception of a obituary, 'From Graceland to the Promised Land,' Haggard handles a number of Presley's best songs.

The country vein is not misleading either, because Elvis' roots were lodged in country and it has taken Haggard to sing it like it was. A superb performance of songs Elvis contributed to the American lexicon, and a fitting tribute because this is a reminder of how atmospheric Presley's songs really were.

David Bowie, Heroes (RCA): Melodramatic space-rock from the genre's leading practitioner. This album combines the talents of Bowie, the most ham-actorish singer around, with former King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp and British avant-gardist Eno.

The combinaton takes off on its own on the second side, which is largely a instrumental space-track, full of electronic gizmos and eerie tunes arranged in a quasi-symponic manner. The first side contains some passionately ambiguous songs.

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Sci-fi movie has stellar special effects

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND
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A Columbia: EMI Presentation; Produced by Julia Phillips and Michael Phillips. Written and directed by Steven Spielberg. Special Photographic effects by Douglas Trumbull. Featuring Richard Dreyfuss and François Truffaut. Running time — 135 minutes.

By BILL BROWNSTEIN
for The Gazette

Almost as common as the many UFO reports in this century have been the countless sci-fi books and films speculating more than to obliterate us earthlings from the face of our native planet.

However, with a few exceptions (notably 'The Day the Earth Stood Still'), the aliens — who were depicted in a wide variety of colors, sizes, and shapes — seemed to want nothing more than to obliterate us earthlings from the face of our native planet.

Whether or not we are actually alone in the universe is still subject to speculation. Nevertheless, if we aren't, it would certainly be reassuring to know that the extraterrestrials are as mellow as Steven Spielberg makes them out to be in 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind,' easily the most ambitious and most expensive film of 1977.

This movie is unquestionably a visual delight. Not since Stanley Kubrick's '2001 — A Space Odyssey' has film technology been better served.

With special effects by Douglas Trumbull, who was partly responsible for those in '2001,' the viewer is exposed to the most dazzling array of UFO's ever assembled on screen. Also, not to be outdone are Trumbull's brilliant light storms and the aliens themselves — a slinky humanoid-resembling species with oversized heads.

Further enhanced by being shot in 70 milimetres and incorporated with dolby sound, the picture has the impact of putting you on top of one of the space ships.

As Spielberg has proven with 'Jaws', he knows how to generate electricity and make an effect.

But if his 'Close Encounter' special effects are sophisticated, its overly simplified and loosely put-together story isn't.

Most of the action takes place in Muncie, Indiana and the mid-west — although it shifts occasionally and ambiguously to Mexico and India amongst other diverse points. In any event, it's in Muncie where Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), a power repairman, unmistakably spots a UFO. His life is significantly altered from that point on.

Neary becomes obsessed with trying to figure what has happened, he loses control, and his wife (Terri Garr) and family consequently skip out on him. Fortunately, he gets moral support from Jullian Guiler (Melinda Dillon) whose three year old son Barry (Cary Guffey) has seemingly been abducted by the occupants of a UFO. Together Neary and Jillian, driven by some cosmic magnetism, go off in pursuit of the UFO's.

But really the plot, as well as the acting, is quite secondary in 'Close Encounters', the special effects and particularly those in the last 30 minutes are what the film is all about.

Dreyfuss acts like you would expect anyone who has just seen a UFO and who must confront a skeptical society. Terri Garr, as in the film 'Oh God,' plays the same hysterical housewife whose husband has seemingly gone off the deep-end. Truffaut appears to be dazed throughout and in a different film from the rest of the cast.

The most interesting performer is probably young Cary Guffey, who looks — and probably is — completely awed by the goings-on.

As for Spielberg, 'Close Encounters' is far more grand in scope than 'Jaws', and those looking for a repeat of the bloody horror of 'Jaws' won't find it here.

Spielberg's attention is not to scare the audience, but to convey, often in propagandizing fashion, his lifelong belief in the exsistence of intelligent life outside the earth.

Even if the story lacks cohesiveness, the thought behind it is an optimistic and pleasant one.

John Travolta and Karen Gorney are disco show stoppers in 'Saturday Night Fever.'

Music is message in 'Fever'

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
Loews and Kent
A Paramount Picture. Produced by Robert Stigwood. Directed by John Badham. Screenplay by Norman Wexler. Based upon a story by Nik Cohn. Featuring John Travolta and Karen Lynn Gorney. Running time — 119 minutes.

Although film footage taken inside the disco is well cut, it is far slicker than need be. The dance numbers are well executed but are too overly choreographed to be realistic.

Another principal part of the movie is dedicated to Tony's relationship with Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney), a would-be sophisticate trying to make it in Manhattan but still more self-assured on her native terrain. Supposedly because of Stephanie's influence, Tony begins to re-evaluate his lot and seeks a way out of his superficial lifestyle.

None of this really comes across too well, and it's a little unclear as to what Tony and Stephanie really want from each other. In any event, they become partners in some super dance contest, and strut their way to disco glory.

The most interesting aspect to 'Saturday Night Fever' deals with Tony and his largely insecure, guilt-ridden greaser buddies — who go to tremendious lengths to impress one another. From back seat orgies in the car to gang brawls to perilous pranks on a bridge, it's a little pitiful and touching watching them try to find an outlet for their pent-up ghetto frustrations.

Although his part does not radically differ from that of TV's Barbarino, Travolta has the necessary ingredients for his first major film role and is often impressive.

Donna Pescow as Annette, a local loser who would give her front teeth and all her KC records to make it with a clearly uninterested Tony, also gives a strong performance.

Unfortunately and as mentioned, it's the music to 'Saturday Night Fever' that predominates and often blares out some potentially strong elements.

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